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Still In the Shadows: A Content Analysis of Sexual Addiction in Couple Therapy

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Presenters

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Still In the Shadows: A Content Analysis of Sexual Addiction in Couple Therapy

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ABSTRACT

There is no universally accepted definition of “sex addiction” in the literature, though it is generally understood as persistent patterns of sexual behaviors acted out despite negative consequences to self or others (Kafka, 2010; Levine, 2010). Though sexual addictions are often addressed individually, most take place within a social context that includes family members and/or intimate relationships. The purpose of this presentation is to present the results of a content analysis of M/CFT peer-reviewed journals and summarize the extent to which this literature addresses sexual addictions and couples therapy. The content analysis adds to the existing literature by examining the ways in which this topic is already addressed in M/CFT journals.

PURPOSE

Carnes (1992) referred to sexual addiction as a “family illness” (p. 65), and Schneider (2000) found that sexual addiction impacted families in various ways. M/CFTs who work with sexual addictions will likely recognize the importance and benefit of treating sexual addiction from a systemic lens.

METHODOLOGY

Analysis included publications from 1996 through 2011. During this time, a total of 14,038 peer reviewed articles were published in these journals (non-articles such as book reviews, editorials, epilogues, movie reviews, etc. were excluded). A standardized protocol was developed to search each journal for articles pertaining to theory, research, and treatment related to sexual addictions and couples therapy. Two different search processes were used with each journal. The first process involved searching through a database (either Psych-INFO, PsychArticles, or Family Studies Worldwide). The second search was done by reviewing electronic copies of the journals. The same 20 search terms were used for the searches. Multiple searches were conducted, and research team members compared their results with each other to ensure reliability.

RESULTS: JOURNAL COUNTS

Journal Title	Total Journal Count (1996-2011)	Total Articles Found Using Search Terms (First-order Sort)	Articles Pertaining to Sex/Pornography Addiction (Second-order Sort)
1 American Journal of Family Therapy	563	5	2
2 Contemporary Family Therapy	327	2	1
3 The Family Journal	1156	16	1
4 Family Process	500	4	0
5 Family Relations	951	4	0
6 Families, Systems, & Health	691	3	0
7 Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology	1791	124	0
8 Journal of Counseling Psychology	798	19	0
9 Journal of Couple and Relationship Therapy	734	5	4
10 Journal of Family Issues	543	3	0
11 Journal of Family Psychology	1022	17	0
12 Journal of Family Psychotherapy	637	6	2
13 Journal of Family Therapy	559	2	1
14 Journal of Feminist Family Therapy	288	5	0
15 Journal of Marital and Family Therapy	854	7	4
16 Journal of Marriage & Family	1442	8	0
17 Psychotherapy: Theory, Research, Practice, Training	1182	4	0
Totals	14,038	234	15

RESULTS: THEMES

Five themes were identified which represent the manner in which the articles addressed sexual addiction:

1. **Definition/Conceptualization:** definitions, conceptualizations, theories, and proposed etiologies regarding sexual addictions.
2. **Assessment:** assessment instruments and protocols.
3. **Behavior:** common behaviors in couples associated with sexual addictions (both addicts and their partners).
4. **Impact/Consequences:** consequences of the addiction for the individual (addict), partner, and the relationship.
5. **Treatment/Therapy:** interventions for both the addict and the couple.

Discussion and Implications

Our analysis of the scholarly journals with an M/CFT focus suggests that research and clinically useful treatment guidelines are lagging behind the problem. The current journal article content does not offer a clear conceptualization or clear direction on how to treat sexual addiction.

Many individuals struggling with sexual addiction do so within the context of relationships, and an individual treatment perspective is inadequate to address relational implications and healing. Due to a lack of research, the literature limits the M/CFTs in finding a solid solution which will work for couples in the treatment of sex/pornography addiction. As clinicians who espouse a systemic perspective, M/CFT researchers and clinicians have the potential to influence the treatment of sexual addictions by addressing the relational impact of sexual addiction and the interpersonal aspects of healing. Our findings suggest the importance of additional research to assist M/CFTs in the diagnosis, conceptualization, and treatment of sex addictions, particularly in relation to systemic therapy.

